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## ABSTRACT

Reacting to whole language zealots who are not willing to hear new viewpoints or engage in a dialogue with people who differ from their paradigm of education, a graduate student-teacher-researcher who is in general agreement with whole language principles responds to a series of conversations in which she was a listener but not a participant. The gist of each of the 12 conversations is given and discussed in turn. Her conclusions are that: (1) while her silence in these conversations was generally tolerated, those who advanced whole language felt there was no place for silence; (2) there is one basic philosophy of whole language that all must learn; (3) there is a "right" way for teachers to act in whole language classrooms; (4) whole language "zealots" have proclaimed that content areas are dead; (5) whole language advocates have proclaimed traditional tests as the work of the devil; (6) textbooks of all sorts are condemned; (7) whole language enthusiasts insist that aliterates are worse off than illiterates; (8) the idea that students need to manipulate texts and to become intimately involved in the writing process is a common "buzz phrase" of the whole language camp; (9) whole language advocates seem not to acknowledge that some students do not learn to read by merely reading; (10) whole language enthusiasts often ignore other voices or do not give others a chance to voice their opinions; (11) whole language advocates find that women have a unique way of thinking and feeling which is not valued by the schools, workplace, or society; and (12) whole language enthusiasts do not listen to people espousing non-politically correct views. (RS)

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An Invitation Extended to Critically Examine Whole Language:  
The Silent Student Speaks

by Nina R. Targovnik

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## An Invitation Extended to Critically Examine Whole Language: The Silent Student Speaks

The whole language perspective is exciting, enriching, and built on solid knowledge about how children learn. One of the main premises of whole language is that alternative voices must be heard. However, I am concerned that some whole language advocates are becoming zealots who do not want to hear critical assessments of their perspectives. Perhaps those who battle an entrenched and well established tradition must become zealots: they might not be heard otherwise. However, a system which espouses freedom of thought and a constant reexamination of values cannot survive if it is not true to its basic premise. I truly want the basic premises of whole language to survive.

The whole language perspective can be as confining as a straight jacket when a group of whole language enthusiasts get together to "discuss" (read proselytize). In these conversations only a single line of thought is valued, the politically correct whole language world view. Those who dare to voice an alternative view are quietly told to think about their positions and to speak up when they arrive at the well spring of truth that these already enlightened whole language advocates have arrived at. Of course, the one-sided view is not held by all of those who profess to be whole language educators. This one-sidedness seems especially damaging to a movement that advocates openness. Moreover, I would not be writing this article if I had not found colleagues with similar concerns.

I want to make it perfectly clear that I am an advocate of most of the ideas about language and the teaching of reading and writing being carried out under the banner of whole language. I should point out that many of those principles and ideas have been

promoted under other banners as well. But my point is not the banner which is raised, I want to discuss and critique the ideas under the banner. I want my ideas honored whether they match those of others or not. Yet, I have found that in far too many conversations and presentations the whole language folks have become the McCarthyites of the day. They scoff at those who advocate the teaching of skills, guffaw at the mention of a basal reader story (as if a story has changed because of its packaging), and howl in derision at the mention of phonics. These whole language advocates have "Truth", and want to make sure the unenlightened are shown the correct path to follow.

This paper includes my responses to conversations in which I didn't participate but rather was a watchful participant. From many experiences with the whole language zealots, I have come to realize that my opinions were not valued because they did not meet the criteria for acceptance. I felt that the conversers did not want me to participate. This narrowing of perspectives makes me uncomfortable-and frightened. I am frightened because it seems possible that a good movement will falter because it has taken on the standard that it has fought against, namely the lack of an openness to alternatives, appreciation of personal views, and the validation of more than one right answer. Do whole language advocates expect that every teacher will unquestionably embrace all of the whole language philosophy? I hope not. In our democratic society, we have a history which includes a variety of political groups, different ways to approach legal issues, and most of these courses of action are valued and respected. We encourage variety, honor differences, and protect minorities: differences are the "real" stuff of this country.

I also feel overwhelmed in these "conversations". I am not used to my ideas not being heard with respect. I know that I view the world in a different light: that I make

connections that others do not see, and I often fail to make the connections others take for granted. There is nothing wrong with this, and in other situations I am encouraged to speak my views and offer my insights. In these conversations, I felt confined by the opinions of the "conservative liberals", people who profess to being open minded yet who are not willing to hear a new viewpoint or engage in a dialogue with people who differ from their paradigm of education. At times, I have been made to feel as if I am a right-wing phonics advocate, or worse a basal reader salesperson. I am neither, I am a student, teacher, and researcher who wishes to engage in dialogues about whole language theory, practice, and improvement. Since some advocates believe there is no room for reflection and voicing opposing views, I must address my concerns in writing. At least this way I know my side of the discussion will be heard.

I also view this situation from an alternative point of view: as a traditional Jew. I have studied Jewish history for many years, and I have held active positions in many different communities. I have seen the effects of political and religious zealotry: from the discrimination of women to the refusal to recognize certain groups of people. I am wary when one side proclaims to have the "truth": religious, political, or educational. I hope that this paper will open lines of communication, so that different parties can speak, and while they may not agree, they recognize the right for each side to exist and own differing view points.

In this paper, issues relevant to the teaching and learning of language will be presented and discussed. I am not asking everyone to agree with my perspective. In fact, I hope that people will argue, discuss, critique and reflect on what I've written. I want to open dialogues with people of differing views, because only then will the silent start

joining the discussion-and add even more richness and depth to the debate from which are sure to grow not one truth-but a variety of truths.

In the following episodes, I am going to recount a series of situations that I encountered numerous times as a teacher, a graduate student, and a conference attendee. The episodes occurred in classrooms, hallways, coffee shops, and other gathering places where open conversations should have taken place -and didn't. I will provide a gist of each conversation-and then I would like to offer my thoughts about the topic of the conversation. I don't mean for these comments to be taken as the truth that should have been spoken, rather my comments are the thoughts that should have been considered, and the difference between those two is very important to me. I don't want to argue for my truth, rather I want to argue for the value of diversity.

Each of these episodes telescope a variety of conversations, and I have taken authorial privilege in summarizing the gist of the episodes.

**Episode 1:** I found that in many conversations about language with whole language zealots my view were not accepted and I began to listen more than talk. I found that gave me more time to reflect, and I knew that in these groups my ideas would be considered archaic (worse than traditional), or naive (I had not yet seen the truth). While my silence was generally tolerated, those who advocated whole language clearly felt there was no place for silence.

Is there a place for silence? Of course there is. Silence can be a very powerful statement, one I think I make every time I consciously choose not to voice my beliefs. Was I chickening out, or avoiding a debate? I think not, I had been in similar situations with the same people, or comparable individuals, that I felt my adding to the conversation would not benefit anyone. My views would be ignored or trampled on (not because they are educationally unsound, but just because whole language refused to critically examine

itself). As I've said before and will continue to say, there are people in these "conversations" who only want to hear ideas which validate their way of thinking. They pretend to listen but they do not hear or acknowledge varying perspectives on life. As long as this continues to be the dominant feature of these discussions, I choose not to be a participant.

I operate in a number of communities, one happens to be a traditional Jewish community. There are wisdom sayings popular from the Rabbis of this community. Among the wise sayings of the Rabbis is this: a person only has a certain amount of words to use in a lifetime, so one must use his/her words carefully and to their utmost advantage. I feel that if I speak in these conversations, my words will hang in the air and not have an impact.

**Episode 2:** One of the "put downs" that whole language zealots use when they want to tell you that you don't know what you're talking about is to say, "Well you're coming along in your thinking. You're about six months behind our group. Come back and talk to us in six months and we'll let you know how you are progressing." The tacit assumption is that there is one basic philosophy that we all must learn and all we need is time to learn. Eventually, we will all come to know the same truth.

**Do we all reach the same theoretical nirvana?** I have this view in my head that the nebulous concept of theory is like a stream, and that the people who are totally enmeshed in the Whole Language theory see themselves as much farther along stream than everyone else. Why do my views have to change? Why is there one stream? How about rapids, tributaries, and cross currents? Why is it assumed in these discussions that whoever has a Whole Language perspective is farther along in their theory (thinking) than someone who doesn't. And that whoever is talking won't be at a different place in three months. Philosophies, people, and conversations do not flow on a linear track,

rather they are multi-dimensional entities, which may change through interactions, or they may become more firmly enmeshed with time. I do not appreciate being cut out of a conversation because my thinking has not "progressed" far enough to speak to this person.

Does this mean that my ideas are not worthwhile to these people because I have not caught up with where they think they are? When I am not forced into silence, I am a champion of Whole Language ideas, but when I am, I feel confined because no critical analysis of Whole Language is allowed. As with anything in life, there are shortcomings in the Whole Language model. These can only be remedied through acknowledgement of their existence and discussions of their implications.

I would prefer to see theories as trees in a forest: everyone has a right to be there, some grow to be big tall oak trees, while others never root, and some stay about the same every year. Trees, like theories may decay or regenerate every year, when the time and conditions are right. This way people can be at different places in a theory and still be "barking up the right tree" (sorry). I may branch out at a different places, and come to see other perspectives, but the trunk (basis) of the theory is the same.

**Episode 3:** Whenever discussions move to talk about things that have been seen in classrooms whether from classroom videos or actual classroom observations, the comments turn to whether the teacher did things the "right" way. Almost always whole language advocates know the right way. When there is disagreement with what the teacher has done, the reason is always given that the teacher had an agenda of his/her own, and that s/he didn't understand whole language theory.

Please forgive me, but I feel that teachers should have their own agendas, and if we are not careful the whole language zealots will be visiting classroom in truth squads to see that the "right" methods are being used. I would worry if the teacher did not have an



agenda when she entered the classroom. How can we operate without agendas, or ways to guide us through our daily lives. When we enter a class we have an agenda of what we want to learn and how we want it presented. How could any system operate without guidelines? Maybe we should work as teacher-educators to operationalize our student's agendas and let them know the forces behind their actions.

**Episode 4:** Whole language zealots have proclaimed that content areas to be dead.

(Sounds like the '60s all over again with the proclamation that God is dead!).  
**Are content areas another dinosaur of our educational evolution?** I'm not willing to give up content areas yet. (Maybe the zealots in *Episode 2* should see me on this issue in six months!) Maybe it's because I come from a tradition that has emphasized content for thousands of years, that I'm not in the position to totally rid schools of this notion. While I try and combine Jewish studies and whole language learning, I see the weaknesses of the current state of Jewish education. By confining the after school programs to 4 or 6 hours a week, we are short changing the students we are trying to teach. There is a lot of information that "has" to be passed on to these students (not to pass standardized tests, but for them to be active members in any Jewish community), and NEVER enough time to do it. As a Jewish history/religion/culture teacher, I try and combine content across all the areas I teach. We may look at the Jewish laws concerning ecology and then start a recycling project outside of school. We study the laws about a holiday, make food baskets (in keeping with the theme of the holiday), deliver them, and then reflect on how our views of this holiday have changed, especially when we come in contact with people who are not as lucky as we are or who are elderly. I guess because I teach a minority about its heritage, history, beliefs, language that I do still think there are content areas out there.

I do believe in teaching across the curriculum, and I see the limits placed on teachers by having them teach science "skills" in science class and math "skills" only in the time allotted for math. I also see that schools are not equipped to change as fast as we would like them. I do not want to see specific content lost: there are certain concepts a student needs to know to be proficient in algebra which can not be taught in reading, or in physics which can not be taught through writing a business letter.

**Episode 5:** Whole language zealots have not only proclaimed traditional tests as bad-they are the work of the devil. Standardized tests, GREs SATs and their ilk are condemned summarily.

**Listen up zealots, some of us feel that there may be a place for general assessments if we learn to use them without abuse.** In my ideal educational world, standardized tests would be used to aide teachers classroom teaching practices, rather than driving instruction, few basal readers would exist, fewer, if any textbooks (and these would be for reference use only), no SATS and GRE'S and more teacher control in the classroom. These times are from ideal. We not only have standardized tests, we have new ones being designed yearly. We are so bogged down in our test taking philosophy that we can't depend on a teacher's opinion about progress and a student's work portfolio, in Indiana, a test, not a teacher, now allows students to pass from one grade to another. Basal readers are appropriate educational tools for some students. I have worked with "severely" learning disabled students who were placed at a school associated with a hospital. These students learned to read and write using basal series. They were also exposed to literature in their classroom environment-the basal work was done in individual reading settings. The majority of these students will be mainstreamed after 2 or 3 years at this school (they start young, 5 or 6), and succeed in school and college. My

sister went there, she's a junior at the University of Arizona, and my brother attended this school, he was a freshman in college when he died. The activities basal readers offer teachers in the teacher's guide are based on educational theory and offer the teacher a wide variety of supplemental activities to enhance lessons. It is a sad commentary on the state of education that we can not utilize basal readers for the good they can offer. We only ridicule teachers who use them, and test the basic skills they offer.

Even at this enlightened school (Indiana University), SAT'S and GRE'S are an important component in getting into school, and grades are used to determine who is to receive a scholarship or fellowship. So, while we preach one philosophy, we act according to another.

**Episode 6:** Textbooks of all sorts are condemned and viewed with almost the same contempt as standardized tests. Throw them all out is the cry of the whole language zealots.

**Is there no place for textbooks in today's schools?** Textbooks are appropriate educational devices when they are used as resources and not the only source of information a student receives. Teachers who would like to break free from the textbook approach to education, need guidance and practical ways to organize their classroom time. Teachers have limited amounts of time, and constantly creating new curriculum is very draining.

The textbook industry is a multi-billion dollar industry in this country. Being an idealistic realist, I'm not sure how to dislodge their stranglehold over the educational classroom. Textbook companies are not going to roll over and play dead: even with the approach of whole language. This will be a long drawn out bloody battle, surrounded by much controversy. Even at Indiana University (IU), I hear complaints from teachers in the

field who groan about how IU graduates are not able to teach "correctly" (using basals and textbooks). I would think that in this community, change would be easier because of the education school and the faculty. I am definitely wrong on this account.

**Episode 7: Whole language enthusiasts insist that alliterates are worse off than illiterates. This is a common constant that runs through the conversations that I have listened to.**

**Should everyone accept the same road to success, happiness, and personal fulfillment?**

Are whole language zealots so insecure in the value of reading that they cannot value the alternative sign systems they profess? Are we so elitist in our thinking that that we can judge what is better for a population? Alliterates have made the choice not to read for whatever reason. It's not the choice I have made in my life, but some of my friends do not read. They receive no pleasure from reading, as I receive no pleasure from solving crossword puzzles. Am I better off? I think not.

Why do we assume that reading is so important? We now have 24 hour news channels on TV-however good or bad they are, they can't be worse than the majority of newspapers in this country. There are also books on tape, which are a form of reading, either for people who drive a lot or who can't or don't want to read. We have other alternate forms of entertainment, which may not be as challenging as reading, but leisure activities should be a matter of personal taste. I would hate it if someone told me that I had to bike ride in order to be considered a thinking member of the community. Why should we do that for reading?

What about using other sign systems to make sense of the world, instead of just print. Is the time I spend in photography (setting up the picture, waiting for the perfect day, using my eyes and sense of reality to compose a thought provoking picture etc..) not as

valuable as the time I spend reading?

**Episode 8:** A common "buzz phrase " in the whole language camp is that students need to manipulate texts, ...to become intimately involved in the writing process...

**Can you be intimately involved in everything you write ( or what happens when you're not)?** In our schools as they currently exist, the majority of students do not have the opportunity to manipulate their texts or become involved in the writing process. They rush through assignments as teachers check off skills and objectives on their giant check sheets. Are these students "writers"? Is what they produce writing? I think the answer to both of these questions is yes. These students do not fit the whole language model of writing, and yet they pass through the school system, graduate, work, etc. I know that their potential is not actualized, but as our schools are currently set up, how many kids reach their potential? Kids whose talents are not in academics or sports are not valued, or given an outlet for their creativity. Are we being self centered by just looking at or thinking about this problem as a reading/writing one? I think it cuts to the heart of the American school system. Kids are not intimately involved with math or science or history, not just reading and writing. While reading and writing are a part of every content area, they are other parts which make the whole in content areas (as they exist presently).

There are texts that I write that I do not become intimately involved with. They are (or were) for required classes, papers where the topic was chosen for me, or topics which did not motivate me to manipulate the texts in ways I could have. Were they well written?

Yes, am I still a writer-sure. Are all writers intimately involved in everything they write, I don't think so.

**Episode 9:** In many conversations, the whole language zealots seem not to acknowledge that some students don't learn to read by merely reading. They seem at a loss as to what to do-and don't recognize that these students are having great difficulty learning to read.

**Do differences exist between students?:** I have come to believe that people caught up in the Whole Language model feel that by ignoring or not acknowledging a problem it does not exist. I am very concerned about the students on the periphery. I am still learning how best to serve them, but I admit that they may need more what is being offered in the regular classroom. I am still coming to grips over what this more may look like, but I allow myself the luxury of questioning what is going on and acknowledging that the future will look different.

I know that in the past special education has made mistakes, but so has every other aspect of education, and we are not clamoring around waiting for the dismantling of every other educational system. Responsible educators and researchers are constantly looking for ways to improve the current educational system, but that should be done methodically, with the student's best interests in mind.

Special education has also helped a variety of students gain acceptance in the "real" world, we now have actors who are Down's Syndrome, characters on television shows who are retarded, deaf, blind etc. Could this change come about with out the increased awareness that special education has brought to our schools?

**Episode 10:** I have taken part in numerous conversations in whole language classes, when I am ready to speak I am often ignored or not given a chance to voice my opinions.

**Do whole language advocates really want to hear other voices?:** If whole language advocates proclaim the need to hear other voices, then are they obligated to listen to the responses? I'm not sure that I want to explain the critical events in my life to the people

in these conversations. The most vivid and dramatic shift in my thinking came after someone close to me committed suicide. I had to question the value and purpose of life. I had to find the resolve to get out of bed each morning and to find something special in each day to make life worth living.

My friend had severe learning disabilities, which is a reason I find it hard to understand that people don't believe in special education. I see how it helped him learn the most basic things in life that we take for granted: speaking, reading, holding a conversation, making and keeping friends. I also know that special education has problems and can't meet the needs of everyone it tries to serve. My friend was also very gifted and the challenge of nothing ever getting easier was too much for him to bear for the rest of his life, so he choose to end it. Life for him was like climbing the same mountain every day and never getting anywhere, and if he managed to get to a place where he understood something, more information or problems were there to challenge and eventually disarm him. I am sharing this information here in the hopes that in the future, people with differing opinions will be shown respect and their views will be heard.

**Episode 11:** Whole language advocates examine the metaphors we live by, and have found that women have a unique way of thinking and feeling which is not valued by the schools, workplace, or society.

**Do women know things differently?** I view a book like Women's Ways of Knowing with trepidation. I think of something like PMS which may or may not exist, but can be used against women. "Women shouldn't do that because they are moody, or will be out of work X number of days per month, or women have been now proven to be the weaker sex." Something that started out as a good idea has been turned upside down. I do not think that women have a unique way of knowing or understanding the world. I think

there is a continuum of "knowing", with potentials for each sex on each end and definitely in the middle. I don't think that by virtue of having a penis a man is logical and a vagina makes one emotional. I think women have been silenced or ignored in certain situations, but in other contexts men have been silenced also.

Episode 12: One time in a conversation in which most of the participants were whole language zealots, a person who was espousing a non PC view stated: "I wasn't sure if I should continue with my story, because no one was paying attention."  
I know exactly how you feel.